

Developing the 2012 Fond du Lac County Farmland Preservation Plan

The importance of Agriculture: Did you know that agriculture is a vital part of Wisconsin's economy accounting for and estimated \$59 billion? In a time where the economic recovery within our country calls for buying American, buying local and creating jobs, Wisconsin agriculture is a natural fit to help achieve all these goals.

Fond du Lac County is a major player in Wisconsin's agricultural economy not to mention the local economy. Some very important county facts include the following:

- Agriculture provides 8,692 jobs in Fond du Lac County
- Agriculture pumps \$2.3 billion in business sales into the local economy (22% of total sales)
- Agriculture contributes \$576 million to county income (Over 14 % of the county's total)
- Agriculture pays \$52 million in taxes each year

Fond du Lac County's top agricultural commodity is dairy products, accounting for \$211.2 million in sales. Dairy products comprise 66.9% of all commodity cash sales in the county. Processing milk into dairy products adds another \$1.2 billion to the local economy. This contribution includes 1,334 farm jobs and another 3192 dairy processing jobs. Fond du Lac County ranks 4th in the state in the number of cows and ranks 5th in the value of agricultural products sold statewide.

Agriculture has weathered the economic down turn better than most sectors. Driven by stable to strong grain and milk prices, there seems to be a guarded, yet positive feeling about the future of agriculture throughout the state. However, agriculture is driven by one of the country's and state's most precious resource; farmland. If farmland is lost, the very foundation upon which agriculture is built begins to crumble.

Wisconsin's Working Lands Initiative: In order to address the loss of Wisconsin's most productive agricultural land and to further promote the economic development of agriculture, the Working Lands Initiative (Wis. Act 28) was approved by the legislature and signed into law in June 2009. The Act revised the state's original Farmland Preservation Program and created new programs, including Agriculture Enterprise Areas (AEAs) and Purchase of Agricultural Conservation Easement (PACE) programs.

Revision of the farmland preservation program included the development of new standards for farmland preservation planning. The Working Lands Initiative creates new higher per acre tax incentives for farmland owners who participate either through a Farmland Preservation zoning ordinance or an individual agreement. (The latter only applies if their land is located within an approved AEA).

Many of the original farmland preservation plans haven't been updated since the 1980s. That is the case with Fond du Lac County. Although the original Fond du Lac County Farmland Preservation Plan (FPP) helped protect agricultural land, an update is essential to ensure eligible farmers can collect increased tax credits and can participate in the newly established PACE and AEA programs.

Fond du Lac County FPP Planning Process: Updating the Fond du Lac County Farmland Preservation Plan presents a great opportunity for county leaders and residents to engage in a real examination of the role agriculture currently plays within the local economy and the future it holds. Because the current global recession has acted like a temporary moratorium to ease development pressure on farmland, it is a particularly good time to plan for agriculture preservation.

To assist in the process, Fond du Lac County contracted with the firm of Martenson and Eisele (M&E) out of Menasha, Wisconsin to develop the new farmland preservation plan. Plan oversight will be directed by the Fond du Lac County Planning Department, who will also provide administrative assistance. The planning process is supported by a grant from Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP).

The Fond du Lac County Farmland Preservation Plan must be adopted by the County Board and certified by the DATCP by December 2012. In order to meet that deadline, a Project Time Line has been developed to guide the process. The planning process includes and welcomes local input and guidance. The process includes two key meeting functions which will occur:

County Stakeholder Working Group: Comprised of 10 individuals who represent key county agricultural interests, this group will work with Martenson & Eisele, Inc. and County Planning staff to refine goals and objectives, review agricultural and housing trends, and assist in the rational used to determine what farmland should be preserved. The Working Group will meet five (5) times throughout the course of the planning process.

Community Cluster Meetings: In an effort to encourage local community involvement (primarily towns) in the planning process, municipal leaders and interested residents will be invited to attend a series of Cluster Meetings. The county will be divided into three sub-regions or “clusters”. The three clusters will include municipalities from the East, Central and West portions of the county. The municipalities will be given the following assignment:

1. Identify what areas (farmland and other resource lands) should be preserved. They will be reminded to use their comprehensive plans (specifically, their Future Land Use Map).
2. Identify which areas are planned for non-agricultural development within the next 15 years.

The communities will be given six weeks to accomplish their assignments. At the end of that period, Martenson & Eisele will ask for all municipalities to forward their agriculture preservation maps to the Fond du Lac County Planning Department.

A draft copy of the Farmland Preservation Plan will be developed by the end of February 2012. The Working Group will review the Draft and recommend changes before the Draft is sent to the municipalities for review and comment. A second round of Cluster Meetings will occur in late March 2012 to discuss any changes. The final round of Cluster meetings is scheduled to occur in late May 2012.

Cluster Meeting #1 Objectives: The objectives for the first round of Cluster Meetings to be held December 6, 7 & 8, 2011 are as follows:

1. Discuss importance of farmland preservation to Fond du Lac County
2. Present the Fond du Lac County Farmland Preservation Plan Process
3. Discuss process, timeline and criteria to identify farmland to be preserved

Thank you for your interest in participating in this very beneficial planning process. The Fond du Lac County Farmland Preservation Plan will be a tremendous success thanks to your interest and guidance.